

Learning Point



What is the difference between performance assessment and project-based learning?

Educational practices have evolved significantly in response to calls for more authentic, meaningful, and engaging learning experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Within this shift, two prominent strategies have gained attention: project-based learning (PBL) and performance assessment (PA).

Despite their frequent interchangeability in discussions, these strategies have distinct purposes and applications.

Project-based learning serves as an instructional approach designed to engage students in authentic, real-world problems, while **performance assessment** functions as a tool for evaluating students' mastery of specific skills or knowledge (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Clarifying the differences between these two methods is critical for educators aiming to effectively integrate them into teaching and assessment practices. This Learning Point describes those distinctions and guides educators in their use.

What is project-based learning (PBL)?

Project-based learning is an instructional method in which students engage actively and collaboratively in the investigation and resolution of authentic, real-world questions or challenges (Larmer et al., 2015). Essential characteristics

“ **Project-based learning** serves as an instructional approach designed to engage students in authentic, real-world problems, while **performance assessment** functions as a tool for evaluating students' mastery of specific skills or knowledge. ”

of PBL include student-driven inquiry, interdisciplinary content, extended timelines, and reflection on the learning process (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Educators implementing PBL typically adopt a facilitator role, guiding students through structured yet flexible processes of exploration, experimentation, and improvement (PBL Works, 2019).

What is performance assessment?

Performance assessment is a method in which students demonstrate their learning by completing tasks or producing artifacts that require the direct application of knowledge and skills (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Performance assessments measure students' ability to use their learning in realistic scenarios, thereby providing authentic measures of their competence (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). These assessments are assessed against clearly defined rubrics and standards (Brookhart, 2013).

The “gray area”: Learning as assessment

The distinction between PBL and PA can easily become blurred if educators are not careful. In PBL settings, students may produce final products or presentations that function simultaneously as performance assessments, effectively merging instructional and evaluative activities (Larmer et al., 2015). Similarly, performance assessments provide rich, embedded learning experiences that promote knowledge construction and deeper understanding (Brookhart, 2013).

This overlap can create confusion among educators regarding when learning ends and formal assessment begins, potentially leading to over-assessment or misunderstanding of the distinct purposes of each strategy. To mitigate these challenges, clear delineation of learning objectives, instructional activities, and evaluative processes is essential.

Intentional design that distinguishes instructional activities from assessment opportunities can support both student engagement and accurate measurement of student progress.

Side-by-side comparison of performance assessment and project-based learning

	Performance Assessment	Project-Based Learning
Nature	Assessment tool	Instructional strategy
Focus	Measuring mastery	Promoting deep learning
Timing	End of instruction	Throughout instruction
Scope	Task-specific	Multidisciplinary, extended project
Teacher's role	Evaluator	Facilitator/coach
Student's role	Demonstrator of skills	Active learner, investigator, collaborator

Conclusion

Project-based learning and performance assessment share an emphasis on authentic, meaningful tasks that require students to apply their knowledge practically. Both enhance student motivation, promote deeper learning, and develop essential skills. However, the two strategies differ significantly in their core purposes. Clearly distinguishing between these roles helps educators leverage each approach effectively to maximize student engagement and learning outcomes. Thoughtful instructional design that explicitly integrates and differentiates learning experiences from assessment tasks is vital.

References

- Brookhart, S. M. (2013). *How to create and use rubrics for formative assessment and grading*. ASCD.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). *Next generation assessment: Moving beyond the bubble test to support 21st century learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (2010). *Beyond basic skills: The role of performance assessment in achieving 21st century standards of learning*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
- Krajcik, J. S., & Blumenfeld, P. C. (2006). Project-based learning. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of the learning sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Larmer, J., Mergendoller, J. R., & Boss, S. (2015). *Setting the standard for project-based learning: A proven approach to rigorous classroom instruction*. ASCD.
- PBL Works. (2019). *Gold standard PBL: Essential project design elements*. Retrieved from <https://www.pblworks.org>
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). ASCD.



Photo by Panos Papoutsis, 2011, *School of the Future* (Doukas School, Athens, Greece), www.doukas.gr

TO LEARN MORE

Learning Point—Performance Assessment: What is it and why is it useful? (MAC 2017)

<https://bit.ly/Perf-Assessment>

Learning Point—What types of assessment methods can support student-centered instruction? (MAC 2022)

<https://bit.ly/42IEjyZ>

Learning Point—How performance assessments strengthen the formative assessment process and help promote student-centered instruction (MAC 2023)

<https://bit.ly/42MLSzn>

The Michigan Assessment Consortium is a professional association of educators who believe quality education depends on accurate, balanced, and meaningful assessment. MAC's Learning Points help increase the assessment literacy of all education stakeholders.